



Do we need religion?

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"I would ban religion completely," British pop-music star Elton John said in a [much-noted interview](#) last November. "It turns people into hateful lemmings, and it's not really compassionate."

It isn't exactly news that many people find religion odious, but what is being called the New Atheism has lately become a booming industry. [Books](#), [articles](#), and [lectures](#) in profusion extol secularism and deride faith in God as pernicious and absurd. Such antipathy to religion was once relegated to the edges of polite society. Today it shows up front and center:

A [California congressman](#) is [cheered](#) for announcing that he is an atheist. A New York Times Magazine cover story -- "[Why Do We Believe?](#)" -- considers "evolutionary adaptation"

and "neurological accident" as explanations for religious belief, but not the possibility that God may actually exist. The European Union issues a 50th anniversary declaration of its fundamental values, but [excludes any mention of Christianity](#). A forthcoming book by Christopher Hitchens, the noted journalist, is titled [God Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything](#).

Yet you rarely have to look far to be reminded of the indispensability of God and religion to civilized life.

On the front page of [Sunday's Boston Globe](#), a photo shows the Rev. Wayne Daly walking with two Boston police officers through Grove Hall in Roxbury. "Targeting areas racked by deadly violence," the caption explains, "members of the Black Ministerial Alliance began an effort

yesterday to pair with police as intermediaries."

Over the next few weeks, some 50 priests and ministers will fan out across the city's most dangerous precincts, knocking on doors and introducing residents to the police officers patrolling their neighborhoods. The goal is to break through the intimidation or distrust that often keeps residents from speaking up about criminal activity. "Underpinning the alliance's strategy," a [news story](#) notes, "is the idea that residents in these neighborhoods . . . may be more willing to talk to law enforcement officials in the future if ministers have paved the way."

I suppose Hitchens and Sir Elton would find this unfathomable. If religion transforms decent people into "hateful lemmings," why would Boston's police turn for help to the local clergy? If religion "poisons everything," who in his right mind would trust men for whom religious witness is a way of life?

To be sure, most of us have no trouble understanding why the pastors are regarded as honest brokers, or why officials hope their involvement will make the city safer. But here's a better question: What prompts these ministers to stick their necks out? Why do they want to be allies of the police in neighborhoods where gangs are ruthless toward "snitches" and other good citizens? For that matter, why do they go into urban ministry in the first place? Surely there are easier, safer, or more lucrative ways to make a living.

There are. But the ministers are driven by a Judeo-Christian moral calculus in which goodness and devotion to others are worth more than an easy, safe, or lucrative career. Judeo-Christian morality demands decency and loving-kindness of its followers -- not as a matter of reason or opinion or "evolutionary adaptation," but of God's will. And from that moral impulse -- to do good because the Creator wants us to do good -- comes the selflessness and strength to rise above oneself.

"I see that moral impulse at work every day," Christian leader Charles Colson has written, "when 50,000 volunteers in [Prison Fellowship](#) around the United States, and another 50,000 around the world go into horrid holes, loving the most unlovable people in the world. You don't do that out of any kind of human instinct -- it is contrary to selfish human nature."

Can ardent secularists, firm in their belief that there is no God to whom we must answer and no morality except that which human beings devise, be good and loving people? Sure they can. And yet when acts of charity and goodness are most needed, it isn't generally groups of New Atheists who are seen answering the call. Who is more likely to care for paupers dying in the streets of Calcutta? Secular humanist associations? Or Mother Teresa's [Missionaries of Charity](#), who take God's word -- "[Therefore love the stranger](#)" -- as a binding obligation? When Boston's police need moral and trustworthy intermediaries, do they find them in an organization

that campaigns against religion? Or in the Black Ministerial Alliance?

The world Elton John dreams of -- a world in which religion is banned -- is one we have already glimpsed. Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot have shown us what lies at the end of that

road. Of course there are exceptions to every rule; of course not everyone who believes in God is good; of course dreadful things have been done in the name of all religions. But a world without God would be an evil place indeed.